The importance of childhood trauma has been largely overlooked in forensic psychology. Some of the most widely quoted theories of offending based on low self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), moral development (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977), personality (Hare, 1993), or a combination of factors (Bonta & Andrews, 2016), have little or nothing to say about the impact of childhood adversity. There are perhaps many reasons why the impact of trauma has been overlooked, some of which were discussed in the introduction. For the purposes of this chapter, two reasons stand out. The first is that childhood adversity is an extremely broad term. For example, the term childhood sexual abuse covers experiences as diverse as long-term incestuous abuse by a carer and a single episode of rape by a stranger. While the consequences of these different experiences may both be profound, they are also likely to be very different (Estes & Tidwell, 2002). The nature and impact of each traumatic episode will be unique. However, it is still possible to identify many of the characteristics of childhood adversity that are particularly toxic in terms of links to offending behaviour, and the first section of this chapter discusses those characteristics.

A second important reason why the link between childhood adversity and offending has been overlooked is that the relationship is extremely complex. As with the nature of trauma, the link between trauma and offending will be unique for each individual, but there are some clear patterns. The second part of this chapter briefly summarises these developmental processes and attempts to integrate them with what we already know about key criminogenic factors.

What Patterns of Childhood Adversity Are Associated with Offending?

While rates of adversity among children who go on to offend as adults are generally higher than among those that do not (Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001; Widom,
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1989), maltreatment or adversity of some sort appears to be a widespread feature of childhood (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress, 2016), and prospective studies of child abuse survivors show that the majority do not go on to offend (Fitton, Yu, & Fazel, 2020). A history of adversity or maltreatment is therefore insufficient per se to predict adult criminal behaviour. However, several different but overlapping patterns of childhood adversity appear to be particularly common among young people and adults involved in the criminal justice system.

Complex Trauma

van der Kolk (2005) defines complex trauma as

the experience of multiple, chronic and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most often of an interpersonal nature (e.g., sexual or physical abuse, war, community violence) and early-life onset. These exposures often occur within the child’s caregiving system and include physical, emotional, and educational neglect and child maltreatment beginning in early childhood.

Brown, Wanamaker, Greiner, Scott, and Skilling (2021) report that 70% of young females and 60% of young males in a Canadian correctional sample had histories of complex trauma, and that a history of complex trauma was associated with high levels of criminogenic needs.

Ford et al. (2012) proposed that complex trauma and delinquency are linked via direct and indirect pathways. The direct pathway involves post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms of diminished arousal reactions coupled with maladaptive hyperarousal which result in episodes of reactive rage and violence. In the indirect pathway, trauma symptoms disrupt the normal development of both secure attachment to caregivers and self-regulatory capacity. These in turn lead to other problems including poor impulse control, substance misuse, impaired information processing, maladaptive thinking, and association with delinquent peers.

Poly-Victimisation

There are various definitions of poly-victimisation, but their common element is exposure to multiple types of traumatic events. Finkelhor, Ormrod, and Turner (2007) suggested various reasons why poly-victimisation is so toxic, including that the debilitating emotional impact of victimisation undermines the ability of children to protect themselves, or that repeated victimisation leads to lower self-esteem or a sense of learned helplessness. Rates of poly-victimisation are significantly higher among justice-involved boys and girls (Ford, Elhai, Connor, & Frueh, 2010; Wood, Foy, Layne, Pynoos, & James, 2002). Among justice-involved young people, poly-victims report more severe PTSD symptoms, emotional and behavioural problems, suicide risk, and substance misuse problems than other trauma survivors (Ford, Grasso, Hawke,
& Chapman, 2013). Ford, Charak, Modrowski, and Kerig (2018) found a direct link between poly-victimisation and substance misuse among justice-involved adolescents, while PTSD symptoms mediated the link between poly-victimisation and increased irritability.

**Betrayal Trauma**

Betrayal trauma is defined as childhood abuse perpetrated by individuals whom the child cares for, depends on, or trusts (Freyd, 1996). Freyd proposed that abuse of this type is particularly damaging and is processed and remembered differently from other forms of abuse or trauma because the victim is physically and emotionally dependent on their abuser. Freyd proposed that emotional numbing enables victims of betrayal trauma to preserve their relationship with their caregiver and persist in behaviours that elicit caregiving. While this dissociation can be adaptive during childhood, betrayal trauma is associated with a range of severe long-term consequences, including emotional numbing, avoidance and a compromised ability to detect betrayal in relationships that leaves survivors at increased risk of repeated victimisation later in life (Gobin & Freyd, 2009). Kerig, Bennett, Thompson, and Becker (2012) found that justice-involved young people who had experienced betrayal trauma experienced numbing specifically for the emotions of fear and sadness, and that this was associated with callous/unemotional traits.

**Experiences of Racism**

People from ethnic minorities are overrepresented in the criminal justice system in many countries of the global north (Cunneen & Tauri, 2019; Webster, 2018), and any review of the links between maltreatment and offending ought to consider the link between experiences of racism and offending behaviour. Because much of the literature on childhood maltreatment has focused on abuse and neglect within the home, racism, which usually occurs outside the home, has often been overlooked as a form of developmental trauma. Nevertheless, Kirkinis, Pieterse, Martin, Agiliga, and Brownell (2018) found that experiences of racial discrimination were significantly associated with trauma symptoms.

Much of the focus in the forensic literature has been on the impact of structural or institutional racism on the lives of people from ethnic minorities, with relatively little research into the impact of interpersonal racism or internalised beliefs resulting from chronic exposure to racism (Trent, Dooley, & Dougé, 2019). Most research in this area is based on the experiences of African Americans. Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) have developed a comprehensive model of African American offending which argues that chronic and pervasive experiences of racial discrimination affect the physical and mental health of African Americans in a similar way to other forms of chronic trauma. Among its other elements, their model proposes that racist stereotypes alienate young African Americans and, in particular, African American men from white-dominated institutions like schools and the justice system. This leads to feelings of anger, depression, and hopelessness that African American men feel they have to suppress in order
to avoid conforming to those same stereotypes which portray them as aggressive or threatening. This leads to a cycle of emotional avoidance, rumination, and self-medication with drugs or alcohol, all of which increase the risk of offending. While Unnever and Gabbidon’s theory is based on African Americans’ unique history and experiences of racial trauma and injustice, many of the processes and mechanisms they describe will probably also apply to other minority ethnic groups.

What complex trauma, poly-victimisation, betrayal trauma, and racism all have in common is that they are likely to severely compromise the child’s sense of safety. In the case of complex trauma or betrayal trauma, a carer, who ought to be the source of safety and protection, becomes the source of danger. In the case of poly-victimisation and racism, the threat is unpredictable but pervasive. As Maslow (1987) has pointed out, after physiological needs, the need for safety is the most basic of human needs, without which, higher level needs for connection and esteem cannot be consistently met. A chronic and pervasive lack of safety in childhood may therefore be a common feature to many who go on to criminal lifestyles because of the disruptive impact that this lack of safety has on the child’s ability to meet other key needs.

**Adolescent Maltreatment**

There is some evidence that maltreatment that begins or extends into adolescence is particularly associated with adolescent antisocial behaviour (Ireland, Smith, & Thornberry, 2002; Stewart, Livingston, & Dennison, 2008), though not all studies have found this (Mersky, Topitzes, & Reynolds, 2012). Kerig and Becker (2015) suggest several reasons why this might be the case, including: that children are resilient and the impact of maltreatment can be mitigated once the maltreatment is stopped; that the additional changes and stresses of adolescence make older children less resilient to the impact of maltreatment; and that child protection services may be less or effective for older children, particularly if they present with antisocial behaviours that prevent them from being seen as survivors of maltreatment. Support for this final hypothesis was found by Ryan, Herz, Hernandez, and Marshall (2007) who found that young people who entered the juvenile justice system from the child welfare system were sentenced more harshly than their peers. Herz, Ryan, and Bilchik (2010) found that this was particularly true for African American young people.

**What Are the Mechanisms That Link Childhood Adversity to Offending?**

While we do not know enough about the complex relationships between childhood adversity and offending, several possible mechanisms suggest themselves.

**Neuropsychological Impact**

Chronic exposure to threat and trauma can have a profound neuropsychological impact. The prefrontal cortex is the site of many higher cognitive functions including
executive control over behaviour, emotions and attention, goal-directed behaviour, abstract reasoning, and social connection. Exposure to severe stress markedly impairs the functions of the prefrontal cortex (Arnsten, Raskind, Taylor, & Connor, 2015), and this is consistent with polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011), which proposes that when the sympathetic (flight/flight) or dorsal vagal (freeze) threat response systems are activated the frontal cortex goes “offline” so that physical and mental resources can be dedicated to the immediate goal of ensuring survival. Chronic stress can lead to loss of dendritic connections in the prefrontal cortex and a corresponding increase in connection within the amygdala (Arnsten et al., 2015). This means that a person exposed to chronic and pervasive trauma may end up living with their prefrontal cortex “offline” for long periods. Because of the prefrontal cortex’s role in executive cognitive functions, this would make it difficult for them to manage their behaviour or emotions, or to plan, learn, or make complex decisions. As the prefrontal cortex is also involved in social engagement, impairment in its function will also have a negative impact on the person’s ability to engage effectively with others.

**Disrupted Attachment**

Where a carer or attachment figure is a chronic source of threat, this can lead to severely disrupted attachment. The central importance of attachment to the development of the child’s interpersonal relationships, self-regulatory and mentalisation abilities, and self-concept means that when the attachment figure is the source of maltreatment, all these systems can be impaired (Cook et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2020).

**Cognitive and Attitudinal Impact**

Childhood abuse by carers is also likely to result in the development of negative perceptions of self, other, and relationships in general. Patterson (1993) described a “cascade of impairment” through which significant others become frustrated by a child’s dysregulated and aggressive behaviour, leading to a cycle in which the child’s sense of rejection or defectiveness increases and their behaviour becomes more dysregulated and aggressive. Ford, Chapman, Mack, and Pearson (2006) argued that when a child loses their self-respect and sense of control, especially if it is done deliberately by a trusted person, the child is likely to resort to “survival coping”, i.e., presenting a tough façade of defiance and callousness to hide their shame and vulnerability.

**Social Learning of Abusive Behaviour**

Children who are frequently exposed to abusive behaviour by carers learn that such behaviour can be effective and learn to victimise others (Reckdenwald, Mancini, & Beauregard, 2013), while Olweus (1993) proposed a similar mechanism underlying bullying in schools.
**PTSD Symptoms**

Childhood maltreatment is related to increased risk of mental health problems, with physical abuse and neglect associated with increased risk for depression and sexual abuse associated with PTSD, low self-esteem, and anxiety (Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2006). Rates of PTSD are significantly higher among justice-involved young people than their peers (Wood et al., 2002). PTSD symptoms are correlated with both the frequency and severity of delinquent behaviour among young people (Becker & Kerig, 2011) and are understood to disrupt emotional processing (Rauch & Foa, 2006) and executive function (Olff, Polak, Witteveen, & Denys, 2014). PTSD symptoms such as irritability, impulsiveness, emotional numbing, and hypersensitivity to threat may also increase the risk of antisocial behaviour (Becker & Kerig, 2011; Kerig & Becker, 2012).

**Trauma and Criminogenic Needs**

A dominant paradigm within forensic psychology over the last 20 years, and one that has had most impact on forensic interventions, has been the Risk Need Responsivity model (RNR: Bonta & Andrews, 2016). An important element of this paradigm is the so-called “need principle”, which is based on research that shows that the greatest reductions in re-offending are associated with providing treatment that targets dynamic risk factors. The RNR model identifies the central eight criminogenic needs: a history of antisocial behaviour, pro-criminal attitudes, pro-criminal associates, antisocial personality traits, family/marital relationship problems, substance abuse, school/work, and leisure/recreation problems, though Bonta and Andrews make almost no mention of childhood adversity or maltreatment as a precursor to these risk factors. However, there is evidence that links maltreatment to each of these factors through a combination of the above mediating factors.

**Problematic Relationships**

Childhood abuse has a devastating effect on the victim’s sense of self and others, and their understanding of relationships (Herman, 1992). Children maltreated by their carers must rely for comfort and support on someone who is also a source of unpredictable fright. Not surprisingly, such children are at significantly increased risk of developing disorganised attachment styles (Cyr, Euser, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2010) that may impair their ability to form stable attachments in late life.

Repeated experiences of maltreatment or rejection in childhood are likely to lead to a sense of self as unloved, inadequate, and incompetent (Hart, Binggeli, & Brassard, 1997). Children who perceive themselves in this way and who expect others to despise and reject them are more likely to blame themselves for negative experiences and have problems eliciting and responding to social support.

Maltreated children are rated as less prosocial and socially competent by their teachers (Kim & Cicchetti, 2003) and are significantly less popular and more likely to be rejected by their peers (Trickett, Negriff, Ji, & Peckins, 2011). In adulthood,
survivors of betrayal trauma experience more problems in intimate relationships than others (Owen, Quirk, & Manthos, 2012).

Men and women who have experienced betrayal trauma report being less trusting in general and in intimate relationships (Gobin & Freyd, 2014), and for men, a sense of mistrust mediated the relationship between trauma exposure and the use of intimate partner aggression (LaMotte, Taft, & Weatherill, 2016).

**Poor School and Employment Performance**

Living in an abusive or neglectful home is associated with a wide range of poor outcomes at school, including academic performance, behaviour and attendance, and aspirations (Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993). Self-regulation, which is correlated with secure attachment (Pallini, Chirumbolo, Morelli, Baiocco, Laghi, & Eisenberg, 2018), is strongly associated with both academic performance and positive classroom behaviour (McClelland & Cameron, 2011). It is perhaps not surprising that children, who spend significant periods of time with their polyvagal threat response systems activated and their frontal cortices offline, will find it difficult to reason, plan, or engage in abstract reasoning, all skills that are essential if they are to benefit from education.

Pereira, Li, and Power (2017) found that exposure to childhood abuse or neglect was associated with a range of employment-related outcomes at age 50, including poor qualifications, increased risk of long-term sickness, unemployment, and financial insecurity. Outcomes were primarily mediated by poor educational ability and, to a lesser extent, mental health problems.

**Antisocial Attitudes**

Bonta and Andrews suggest three groups of antisocial attitudes: neutralisations that minimise feelings of guilt or shame by denial or blaming, identification with criminal others, and rejection of convention.

- **Neutralisations.** Bonta and Andrews draw parallels between neutralisation and the concept of moral disengagement, which Bandura (2002) defined as “cognitive restructuring of inhumane conduct into a benign or worthy one” (p.101). Hyde, Shaw, and Molianen (2010) found that early parental rejection was associated with reduced empathy in young boys, and significantly predicted adolescent moral disengagement. Wang et al. (2017) found that moral disengagement partially mediated the relationship between childhood maltreatment and adolescent bullying behaviour.

- **Identification with Criminal Others.** Many criminal gangs regard themselves as families (Ruble & Turner, 2000), and DeVito’s (2020) study of US gang members found that they frequently reported a lack of consistent secure attachment figures during childhood, as a result of parental death, divorce, parental substance abuse or absence. Gangs provided a surrogate family that provided connection, validation, respect, and safety. Perhaps because they are more likely to experience physical
or sexual abuse within the home, female gang members are more likely to regard gangs as a source of safety (Sutton, 2017).

- **Rejection of Convention.** Bonta and Andrews define rejection of convention as “devalu[ing] the social institutions of work and education, and the institutions of law and order” (p.141). It is perhaps not surprising that people who have struggled to engage successfully with education or employment would be devaluing these institutions. Mistrust of institutions is linked to devaluing them and people who have experienced betrayal trauma report higher levels of general mistrust of others as well as higher levels of relationship-specific mistrust (Gobin & Freyd, 2014). Unnever and Gabbidon (2011) argue that historical and lived experiences of negative stereotypes, discrimination and racial injustice, in which the police, courts, prisons, state and federal governments have been complicit have led many African Americans to see these agencies as oppressive and lacking legitimacy.

There is further evidence of links between trauma exposure and attitudes towards violence:

- **Violence-Supportive Attitudes.** Baron and Forde (2020) found a direct association between experiences of childhood abuse or neglect and criminogenic schemas that included a hostile view of relationships, a focus on immediate rewards, and a cynical orientation towards conventional norms and rules. These schemas mediated the relationships between childhood maltreatment and violent behaviour and between childhood maltreatment and association with criminal peers. Baron and Forde suggested that experiences of maltreatment promote a hostile and mistrustful view of relationships that undermines empathy for others, that children exposed to manipulation, exploitation, and neglect learn that future rewards promised by delaying gratification are unlikely, and that children exposed to models and rules that promote contempt towards conformist morals are likely to develop a cynical view of conventional norms. Unnever (2014) found that African Americans who “bought into” racist stereotypes were more likely to offend.

- **Violent Fantasies.** Maniglio (2010) suggested that some survivors of childhood maltreatment may develop feelings of helplessness, inferiority, and lack of control with which they cope by withdrawing from the real world and taking refuge in a fantasy world in which they are strong and powerful. Maniglio’s review of studies into sexual homicides found that childhood maltreatment, social difficulties, a sense of inadequacy, and sadistic sexual fantasies were common features among sexual murderers. Support for this model came from Daversa and Knight (2007) who found that the relationship between childhood abuse and the use of sexual fantasy for coping by adolescents convicted of sexual offences was mediated by feelings of sexual inadequacy.

- **Violent Scripts.** While much of the research on fantasy and offending has focused on sexual fantasies and their links to sexual offending, it seems likely that similar processes may link violent fantasies and violent offending. There is, however, evidence that exposure to violence during childhood shapes violence scripts, that is, assumptions and expectations about violence. Wilkinson and Carr (2008)
explored the experiences of minority ethnic young men from New York who had recent experience as perpetrators or victims of violent crime. Virtually all participants had experienced exposure to community violence. A common script was the need to respond to insults or disrespect with aggression in order to save face. Wilkinson and Carr also reported that frequent exposure to violence also led to desensitisation and to moral disengagement.

**Antisocial Personality Traits**

Bonta and Andrews (2016) define antisocial personality traits in terms of the DSM-5 criteria for antisocial personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), which include deceitfulness, impulsiveness, irresponsibility, and lack of remorse, all of which can be linked to childhood maltreatment.

- **Deceitfulness and Manipulativeness.** Manipulation is a frequent element of childhood abuse, for example in being groomed into sexual abuse or in being controlled during and after abuse to ensure the child’s compliance and silence. It is likely therefore that survivors of grooming and manipulation will learn to use these techniques on others, particularly if they are young or physically vulnerable, making direct confrontation or physical resistance dangerous. Since maltreated children often lack the social competencies to negotiate and persuade others at school (Kim & Cicchetti, 2003), they are thought to be more likely to resort to threats or manipulation.

- **Impulsiveness.** Secure attachment to caregivers in childhood is an important factor in the development of emotional and behavioural self-regulation and interpersonal competence (Bowlby, 1973; Sroufe, 2005), and childhood maltreatment is linked to emotional dysregulation and impulsive behaviour in adulthood (Oshri, Sutton, Clay-Warner, & Miller, 2015). Children’s ability to regulate themselves is understood to be shaped by repeated experiences of caregivers’ sensitive regulation of their distress, which fosters a sense of security, and this ability is impaired by early experiences of abuse or neglect by caregivers. Children and young people who are unable to regulate the intensity of emotions and impulses may engage in a range of behaviours that can be understood as attempts to self-regulate, including aggression towards the self and others and substance misuse.

- **Irresponsibility.** The development of responsibility overlaps with constructs such as moral development, empathy, and prosocial values and develops in childhood through interactions with family, peers, schools, and communities (Wray-Lake & Syvertsen, 2011). Children growing up with caregivers who model irresponsible behaviour or values through their neglect or abuse, or who fail to form prosocial peer groups or engage with school, or who grow up in high crime communities with little sense of cohesion are less likely to develop responsible attitudes or behaviours.

- **Lack of Remorse.** Maltreated children may learn to cope with distressing emotions through emotional numbing, which can develop into emotional detachment and callousness. Freyd (1996) argued that this is particularly likely in survivors
of betrayal trauma. Kerig, Bennett, Thompson, and Becker (2012) found that the association between trauma exposure and callous-unemotional traits was mediated by emotional numbing.

**Criminal Associates**

Because of their difficulties in regulating their emotions (Schwartz & Proctor, 2000), maltreated children are more likely to be excluded from conventional peer groups due to their aggressive behaviour (Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991). Because of their disengagement from school, they are therefore more likely to become isolated or to associate with antisocial peers (De Vito, 2020; Sutton, 2017).

**Substance Abuse**

Substance abuse can function as a coping mechanism that enables abuse survivors to alleviate distress or trauma symptoms (Sturza & Campbell, 2005), but it can also exacerbate other criminogenic needs, including relationship problems (Fairbairn et al., 2018). Adolescents who have experienced childhood maltreatment, particularly poly-victimisation and sexual abuse, are at increased risk of substance abuse (Bergen, Martin, Richardson, Allison, & Roeger, 2004; Ford, Elhai, Connor, & Frueh, 2010; Hamburger, Leeb, & Swahn, 2008). Attachment relationships and substance use both function to regulate emotions and both share similar neurobiological mechanisms (Burkett & Young, 2012). Abuse survivors with an avoidant attachment style appear particularly likely to use substances to cope (Hayre, Goulter, & Moretti, 2019). Hayre et al. suggested that young people with an avoidant attachment style may be less likely to disclose their activities or seek support from their parents, and more likely to rely for support on peers who also engage substance misuse.

**Leisure/Recreation**

The relationship between childhood adversity and lack of prosocial leisure and recreation activities may be similar to the link with education and employment. Young people who struggle with self-control and who live in “survival mode” with their frontal cortex offline may well struggle to engage in structured recreational activities.

Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, and Johnston (1996) found that young people who engaged in unstructured socialising with peers were more likely than others to engage in antisocial behaviour, drug and alcohol use, and risk-taking behaviours such as dangerous driving. Osgood et al. found support for their hypothesis that three features of unstructured socialising combined to increase risk of delinquency: exposure to antisocial peers, lack of adult supervision, and the greater opportunity to engage in antisocial behaviour provided by the lack of structure. While there is no evidence on the links between childhood adversity and use of leisure time, it could be hypothesised that all three features would be more common in survivors of childhood adversity.
may be more motivated to avoid contact with or supervision by their parents. As well as increasing their likelihood of associating with antisocial peer, their poorer interpersonal skills, mistrust of others, and unpopularity with prosocial peers may mean they are less likely to become involved in structured activities such as sport.

**Criminal History**

The principle that “past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour” is applied widely in psychology, rather than specifically to the field of trauma. However, there are still some reasons why trauma survivors may be more likely to have a criminal record.

Running away from home is both a consequence of maltreatment, a risk factor for further abuse, and a risk factor for delinquency, with homeless young people more likely to engage in crime to support or protect themselves (McCarthy & Hagan, 1991). Studies of women’s pathways into offending have highlighted that many women first come into contact with the criminal justice system because of behaviours they engage in to escape or cope with abuse, such as drug use, sex work, and shoplifting while homeless (Brennan, Breitenbach, Dieterich, Salisbury, & Van Voorhis, 2012; Chesney-Lind, 1989), though McCarthy and Hagan reported a similar pattern for some young homeless men.

As a consequence of institutional racism, people of colour are more likely to have a criminal record. In the US, people of colour are arrested at higher rates, charged more severely, are more likely to be convicted and more likely to be imprisoned than their white counterparts, even for crimes that both groups engage in at comparable rates (Barabas, Dinakar, & Doyle, 2019), while similar findings have been found in the UK (Uhrig, 2016).

**Protective Factors**

Even among young people who have been exposed to severe trauma, offending is not inevitable. For example, Turner, Shattuck, Finkelhor, and Hamby (2016) reported that 68% of young people who identified as poly-victims reported having not engaged in property-related delinquency, and 52% reported having not engaged in violent delinquency. A number of protective factors have been identified that appear to mitigate the impact of trauma.

**Individual Protective Factors**

Consistent with criminological literature that shows a strong relationship between low self-control and antisocial behaviour (Pratt & Cullen, 2000), high levels of self-control among survivors of childhood maltreatment has been found to protect against future offending (Wright, Turanovic, O’Neal, Morse, & Booth, 2019). Wright et al. also found low depression to be protective. Among African Americans, having a positive sense of racial identity moderates the criminogenic impact of racism (Isom, 2016).
Social Protective Factors

Academic and occupational achievement, reflected by attending and graduating from college and having a sense of job satisfaction, have all been identified as protecting survivors of childhood maltreatment from future violence as protective (Widom, 2017; Wright et al., 2019). Where relationships with primary carers are abusive, there is evidence that caring and supportive relationships with others can be protective. For example, a close relationship with siblings or involvement in team sports have both been found to reduce the risk that physically abused boys would later become involved in violent crime (Kruttschnitt, Ward, & Sheble, 1987).

Summary: The Long-Term Impact of Childhood Maltreatment

The links between maltreatment and offending involve multiple pathways, but a common feature appears to be a chronic and pervasive lack of safety. This lack of safety impacts on the young person’s autonomic threat responses, their attachment to carers, and their developing schemas about themselves, others, and the world. Young people are also resilient and resourceful and most find alternative ways to achieve a sense of safety, one of which may be to engage in crime and antisocial behaviour.

While we cannot say that developmental trauma is a precursor to offending in every case, certain types of trauma do appear to increase the risk of offending, and particularly of serious offending (Duke, Pettingell, McMorris, & Borowsky, 2010; Fox, Perez, Cass, Baglivio, & Epps, 2015). There appear to be multiple mechanisms underlying this link (neuropsychological, attachment, cognitive, social learning), which is mediated by the central eight criminogenic needs.

Further Reading

Herman, J. (2015). Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror. Basic Books. For readers wanting an introduction to the trauma literature, Herman’s book, originally published in 1992, was an important landmark in the field and is still relevant.

Unnever, J.D. & Gabbidon, S.L. (2011). A theory of African American offending: Race, racism and crime. Routledge. A comprehensive but accessible account of how the lived experiences of African American men relates to their overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. Although specific to African Americans, much of it will apply to other groups and countries.

References


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Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. Basic Books.


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